

Using Goats for Vegetation Management

by Brian Bull*

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Many cattle producers spend a large amount of money each year to control undesired plants (weeds and brush). Producers incur the primary cost by purchasing herbicides and hiring equipment and operators to clear brush and reclaim lands that have become unable to support cattle at an acceptable production level. In order for today's producers to have a chance at making an almighty dollar, every acre of ground capable of being productive must be used. Enter goats.

Goats possess a unique characteristic that separates them from almost all other types of livestock. They would rather eat brush and weeds than grass because they are browsers, whereas cattle are grazers. Browse makes up approximately 60 percent of a goat's diet but only about 10 to 15 percent of a cow's.

My family has a goatherd. I remember the day we first turned 200 goats out into a 30-acre "pasture" that was 25 percent impenetrable because of thick scrub oak and briars. The remaining 75 percent was overgrazed and had an alarming amount of weeds (forbs). The goats hit that wall of brush at a dead run and stripped every leaf off of every stem and branch. It amazed me. We had estimated that it would take three months for the herd to eat all of the brush, briars, and weeds. Six weeks later, those 30 acres looked like a golf course with a few sticks where the short brush used to be, and not a weed in sight. The goats had made a browse line in the taller brush, too (figure 1). It gets better. During the winter the goats wouldn't eat the hay we put out until they had cleaned up every dead leaf that had fallen off the trees. Simply amazing.

Another advantage of goats is that, unlike a bulldozer, they control brush and weeds without disturbing the existing grass and soil. They also do not leave synthetic chemicals that could run off into lakes and streams or be ingested by a cow or other animal. These characteristics make goats ideal candidates for multispecific-many species-rotational grazing. The goats can be rotated in to eliminate most of the undesirable vegetation (from a cow's perspective), and then the cows can come behind them to graze the grass without having to pick through as many weeds.

Goats have excellent reproductive ability. If goats are given the opportunity to breed and reproduce, they typically produce an average of two kids per doe yearly. The producer can keep the big ones to eat brush and weeds, sell the little ones to pay for the big ones, and eventually control the brush at minimal cost, no cost, or possibly even a little profit.

Now that everyone's excited, I have to let some air out of the tires. Goats are not expense free. When kept in the same pasture more than three months, they must be wormed every three weeks or so.

Speaking of being in the same place for extended periods, in order to effectively eliminate brush and weeds, the goats must be kept in the area to be controlled until all of the undesirable plant species are eliminated. The key word here is *kept*.

Goats have a tremendous propensity to roam. If they had their way, they would eat a few bites, trot 10 yards, eat a few more bites, trot-you get the idea. By midday, the entire herd would probably be about 2 miles away from where they were supposed to be. Then as evening came along, they might show up again when all of the coyote howling scared them, if they hadn't been chased or eaten already.



Figure 1. Browse line made by goats. The browse line is beneficial because one can actually see through the lower portion of the brush and find the goats. It also allows sunlight to penetrate, which permits grass to grow under the brush.

It is possible, even probable, that you will have to modify existing fences just to keep the goats in the desired area and predators out of it (figure 2). If they can get their head through a fence, they can probably get their body through it too. Hog wire doesn't count, however. If they got their head through some of that, they would remain there stuck and screaming until you came and got them out, at which time they would fight you. All this goes to show that, although owning and using goats can have fairly significant drawbacks, it can be beneficial from a brush control standpoint.

So if you don't mind changing your routine a bit and are willing to manage goats properly, they could save you a lot of money on brush and weed control and possibly help make a little extra cash along the way.

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Figure 2. Comparison of pastures grazed and ungrazed by goats. Six years ago, when goats were introduced, the pasture on the left was similar to that on the right. Since then, the goats have improved the pasture on the left, while the one on the right has been allowed to grow uncontrolled.